

***** WHAT IS A BUDDHIST? *****

I was recently invited by Ven. Dr Saddhātissa to give a talk at the London Buddhist Vihāra on the topic of 'Experiences in Buddhist Countries by an English Buddhist'. What is a Buddhist, I wondered?

Many people call themselves Buddhists and many people have different ideas of what a Buddhist is. It is only by understanding more of the Buddhist teachings that we will have a clearer knowledge of what this really means. The more we follow the Teachings, the more we will see what beginners we are in the practice and how few are the moments of kusala cittas or wholesome states of mind.

Many people think that to be Buddhists they need to change their ways of life. For example, some think that they should not have big houses or grand clothes or that they should become monks or at least give away all their possessions. But, who can judge who are good Buddhists or what the others' states of mind are at any moment from just the outward appearances? In the Buddha's time, many followed his Teachings and developed enough wisdom to become enlightened. Among these were people from very different backgrounds, rich and poor, monks and laypeople. We may think that Buddhism is impractical and that it means leading inactive lives. This is not so; what it does mean is beginning to understand our lives with more sincerity and courage whatever our lifestyles are. We may think we do not mind about possessions or where we live, for example, but we need to be very honest with ourselves.

We all have different tendencies and follow different interests. When I was in India last year with friends from Thailand on a pilgrimage, we visited the spot where Aṅgulimāla, the robber, was supposedly buried. Aṅgulimāla received his name from his attempt to attack a thousand travellers, kill them and take a finger from each to make into a garland. However, there were conditions for Aṅgulimāla to hear the Buddha and understand the meaning of his Teachings even though the people were yelling at the king's palace for the robber's life.

Some people think that Buddhism is specific to Buddhist countries and that it cannot be practised in the West. After my talk, one gentleman from Sri Lanka pointed out how people from Sri Lanka are brought up with Buddhism and knowledge of the Teachings. People have also commented on how fortunate I have been to spend time in Buddhist countries. This is true; however, Buddhism is the teaching of realities that exist from moment to moment for all, whether in the East or West, this culture or that culture. It is very valuable to hear, read and consider the Teachings, but it has to be with right understanding. The Buddha pointed out that there are three different listeners: there is the 'topsy-turvy-brained' who pays no heed, there is the 'scatter-brained' who pays heed at the time, but when he has risen, he forgets what he has heard. The third is the listener with the 'comprehensive mind who listens, pays heed, and considers!'

We may have read a lot, but one line of the Tipitaka read with right understanding is more valuable than the whole Tipitaka

Cont.

read with no understanding. My friend and teacher in Thailand, Ajun Sujin, points out that even when one is rushing and tired, there can be awareness. It is not a matter of stopping or going to a different room or moving to the country if one lives in the city. Whatever happens in one's life happens because of different causes and conditions. Who knows what will happen next? Who can direct it?

I was asked what had led me originally to the East and to my interest in Buddhism, and how it compared with my previous studies of Western Psychology. On my visits to Sri Lanka, I have always been asked why someone brought up in a Christian background becomes so interested in Buddhism. I point out that Buddhism is very logical. The first time I visited Sri Lanka, I lived for several months in a temple. I thought this would be useful for following the Buddhist path. However, the more I understood that it is impossible to control life because it is conditioned from moment to moment, the less inclined I was to follow a particular practice in order to try and have quick results in a special quiet environment. There is no sudden enlightenment without the gradual development of understanding and awareness, however much our wishful thinking would like to think otherwise. I understood more clearly, from my reading and considering with friends, that Buddhism cannot be separated from our daily life. It is only some who are naturally inclined to living in a temple.

Sometimes we wonder how to help children or friends. If there is no example of beginning to understand more of our lives at this moment with patience and courage, can we help others? If we do not begin to realise the difference between attachment and kindness towards these people, will we follow what is useful? We may think that in order to lead 'better' lives, we should be in another place following other occupations. For example, I used to feel guilty every time I heard about the refugees in Cambodia, because I thought I should be helping in some way. However, it was pointed out to me that the greatest gift or help is developing wisdom and giving up the idea of a self who can control life at this moment.

We need to be reminded that there is 'fire on our heads' and that death can come at any time. The Buddha encouraged us to remember this many times a day in order that we might see the urgency to develop awareness. We need to be aware of the realities appearing through the eyes, ears, nose, tongue, body and mind at this moment. There is no other moment. This is the meaning of insight meditation or vipassanā. The more awareness of that which experiences or is experienced at this moment, the more we can see that it is a world of concepts and dreams we live in and think exists. There is no moment when there is not a truth to be known. Greed, hatred, kindness, generosity, hearing and sound are not just words or labels, but they represent phenomena which can be understood with awareness when they occur.

We can question what the aim of our life is and what is the happiness which we consider so important. We considered how it is important to remember that the absolute meaning of dukkha or suffering refers to the impermanence of all conditioned realities.

Cont.

If our aims and happiness depend on our home and marriage and career, for example, we can see how these can collapse at any moment and bring so much unhappiness. What we cling to cannot last. If we are really concerned to follow and understand the Buddha's teachings, we will begin to live a more contented and skilful life and discover the real meaning of freedom and what it means to be a Buddhist.

"Come, behold this world, how it resembles an ornamented royal chariot in which fools flounder. For the wise, however, there is no attachment to it."

Dhammapada, v 171

Sarah Procter

